

Picked Last Women and Terrorism

By ALISA STACK-O'CONNOR

Female Soldier
searches Iraqi
woman at suspected
insurgent location



1st Combat Camera Squadron (Jeremy T. Lock)

Scholars date the genesis of modern terrorism to the People's Will in Russia in the late 1800s.¹

If terrorism's Garden of Eden was indeed Russia, then Vera Zasulich was Eve. On January 24, 1878, Zasulich shot the Governor General of St. Petersburg. She was arrested and tried for attempted murder. Although this was not her first arrest—she had been in prison, banished, and under police supervision since 1869 for her political activities—two prosecutors refused to try her

for the shooting.² She was ultimately acquitted and left Russia, but remained involved in the revolutionary movement, writing for two Marxist publications.

Although times have changed since Zasulich was active, in examining how and why terrorist groups employ women, many things remain the same. For example, in pre-revolutionary Russia, women were less likely to be arrested, and when they were, they were not taken seriously³ or were forgiven, as was Zasulich. While her colleagues admired her

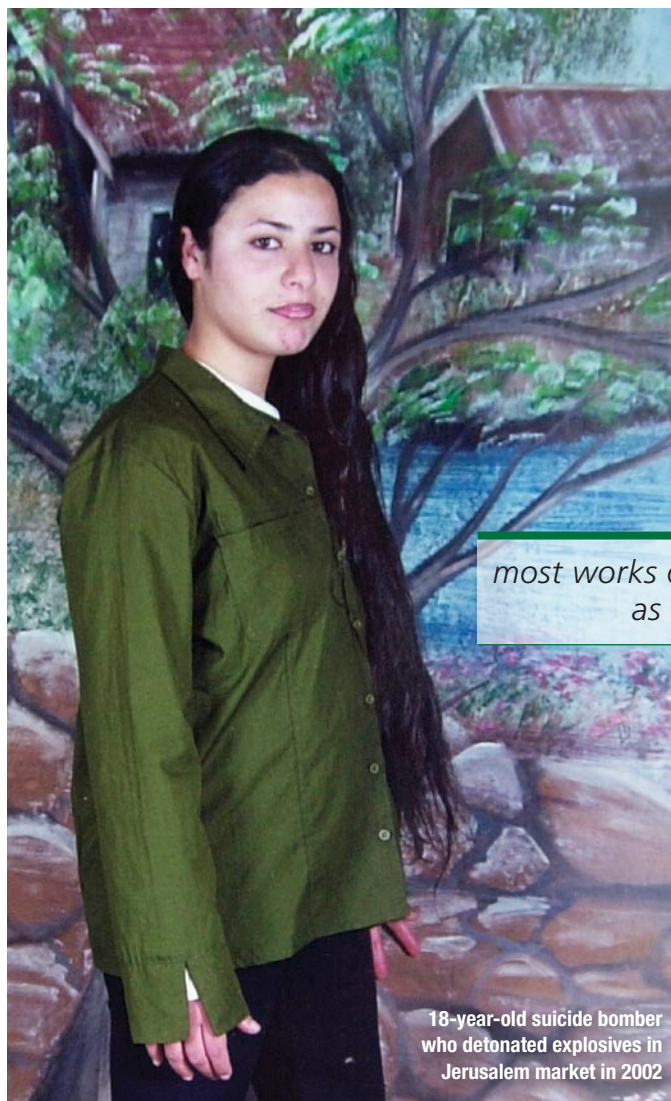
act of violence, they had less respect for her intellect, reflecting a typical assumption that women act out of emotion rather than a rational political program.⁴

Women's roles in Russian revolutionary groups increased when the number of men available for political activism was reduced by the Russo-Japanese War and security measures.⁵ These women had the reputation of personal, rather than ideological, dedication to the cause, leading to the belief that they were more willing to die than their male comrades.

These observations reflect a profound ambivalence about women and political

Alisa Stack-O'Connor is Deputy Director, Policy Planning, for the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

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18-year-old suicide bomber who detonated explosives in Jerusalem market in 2002

AP/Wide World Photo

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academic and policy interest in the subject. The few works on female terrorism tend to focus on women's motivations for violence. This article, however, examines the groups' motivations for employing women. Additionally, it offers proposals for policymakers to consider in combating terrorism.

discredit the Chechen insurgent and terrorist groups.

The zombies tend to receive more sensational press coverage. The best example of a zombie is Zarema Muzhikhoeva. On July 9, 2003, Muzhikhoeva failed to set off her bomb at a Moscow cafe. She was arrested and has been in custody ever since. The Russian Federal Security Service released some of its interviews with her and also allowed a televised interview.⁷ Some of Muzhikhoeva's statements contradict each other. However, her basic life story stays fairly constant: she was married in her teens and had a child. Her husband died fighting the Russians, and

she and her child then became the responsibility of her husband's family. Desperate either to escape servitude to her in-laws or avoid

Female Terrorism as Propaganda

Terrorism has been called "propaganda of the deed."⁶ When women do the deed, the story often becomes more about women than terrorism. This dynamic is particularly evident in the Russian-Chechen conflict. Until the hostage-taking at

marrying her brother-in-law, Muzhikhoeva ran away, leaving her child. When she could not find work, she borrowed money. When she could not repay her debt, she felt driven to become a suicide bomber. According to Muzhikhoeva's account, she went to a terrorist camp in the mountains of Chechnya in March 2003, where Arabs provided instruction on fighting and Islam. She reported being beaten for dressing inappropriately and having sex with the camp leader. She also reported that other women in the camp were raped, beaten, and drugged. After a month of training, she was sent to Moscow to conduct an attack. Zombie stories such as Muzhikhoeva's are attention-grabbing, benefiting Chechen objectives, and explain away women's violence, benefiting the Russian government.

Although the zombie depiction is less flattering to individual women than the black widow stereotype, both have similar effects on the public inside and outside of Russia. The Chechens gained much attention and some sympathy from terrorist attacks by women.⁸ In a July 2003 survey, the Public Opinion Foundation of the All-Russia Center for the Study of Public Opinion found that 84 percent of Russians surveyed believed female suicide bombers were controlled by someone else (zombies); only 3 percent believed the women acted independently.⁹ Similarly, Western authors have blamed Russian actions for forcing women into terrorism.¹⁰ In contrast, there is little writing about the desperation of men who have lost wives, mothers, and sisters

violence. This article examines Chechen, Palestinian, and Tamil terrorist groups to discover how and why such groups employ women. Three themes about women's entry into and roles in these groups emerge:

- Terrorist attacks by women have unique propaganda value.
- Women have to fight for their right to fight.
- Groups overcome cultural resistance to women's involvement when tactics require it or they face a shortage of males.

There is little written about female terrorists. Most works on female violence look at women as victims, not perpetrators. Recent high-profile attacks involving female perpetrators—such as the 2004 Beslan hostage-taking and the April 2006 attack on Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, head of the Sri Lankan army—have sparked some

the Dubrovka theater in Moscow in October 2002, Chechen women were viewed primarily as victims of the Russian-Chechen wars. In the theater seizure, they emerged in the Russian and Western press as vicious, sympathetic, strong, fanatical, foolish, and weak, often in the same portrayal.

Two images come to the fore in media reporting on Chechen female terrorists. First, there is the "black widow," a suicide bomber who is driven to terrorism after the deaths of the men in her life. Second, there is the "zombie," who is forced or tricked into terrorism by Chechen men. Although the Chechen groups did not coin the terms *black widow* and *zombie* to describe their female members, their leaders, such as the recently killed Shamil Basayev, have played up the black widow image, emphasizing victimization. The zombie image is generally used by the Russian government and media to

to excuse or explain the Chechen call to arms. Women terrorists serve a uniquely feminine role in propaganda by playing the victims even when they are the perpetrators.

Female Palestinian suicide bombers have been depicted in much the same way as the zombies and black widows. As in the Russian case, the Israeli government has not hesitated to use women's personal stories to discredit them and the movements they worked for. Palestinian groups, unlike their Chechen counterparts, have been more active in using women's stories for the group's benefit. Ayat Akhras, for example, an 18-year-old female, blew herself up outside a Jerusalem supermarket on March 3, 2002, in an attack claimed by Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigade. Her attack illustrates the propaganda value of female terrorists in shaming Arab men into action. In her martyr video, she states, "I am going to fight instead of the sleeping Arab armies who are watching Palestinian girls fighting alone; it is an *intefadeh* until victory."¹¹

In both the Palestinian and Chechen cases, the propaganda effect of women's attacks does not appear to be a factor in group planning; rather, it is an externality provided by the media. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or Tamil Tigers), on the other hand, have been highly successful in employing women in propaganda. The LTTE allows active female fighters to meet with the press, publishes books about its female guerrillas (the Freedom Birds), makes films about them, and holds public events to commemorate them. It is also careful to separate the group's guerrilla and terrorist activities. Unlike the Chechen and Palestinian groups, the LTTE does not acknowledge suicide attacks. Instead, it promotes the Freedom Birds, showing them as equal to male fighters and liberated from cultural oppression through fighting for the organization.

In all three cases, the media coverage of terrorist events differs based on whether a male or female conducts the act. Media coverage of a female terrorist tends to focus on the woman's nonpolitical motivations (for example, death of a male family member), her vulnerability to recruitment because of her personal life (for example, promiscuity), and her basically peaceful and nurturing

character. The coverage of male terrorists, on the other hand, generally focuses on the act committed. As terrorists need media attention to spread their message, the unique portrayals of females are one of the important factors in women's employment in terrorist attacks.

With the exception of the LTTE, it seems male terrorists and insurgent leaders are unaware of the propaganda benefits of female attacks; however, whether they plan for it or not, the media create it for free. Because terrorist leaders may not recognize the propaganda value, it cannot by itself explain why terrorists would want to use women. For most groups, the sympathy or increased attention is an externality realized only after women are involved in the group and its violence.

Fighting to Fight

Like women entering legitimate militaries and the labor force in general, females have to demonstrate great determination in gaining access to terrorist groups. In the Palestinian, Chechen, and Tamil cases, they have asked for active roles in political violence before groups invite them to take part. This

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trend is most evident in the Palestinian case, particularly in Leila Khaled's story. Denied a fighter's role in the Arab Nationalist Movement and then Fatah, Khaled kept searching for a group that would allow her to fight until the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) put her into guerrilla training. She hijacked aircraft in 1969 and 1970 for the PFLP, eventually becoming active in the group's leadership. She garnered international media attention after her foiled 1970 hijacking landed her in jail in the United Kingdom. Like the attention to Chechen women more than 30 years later, the media focused on Khaled's beauty and youth, not her politics.

Her fame and involvement in the political leadership and tactical operations of the PFLP are not typical of women participating in Palestinian militancy. Most were involved in support roles and on the fringe of groups. In addition to a male cultural aversion to bringing women into militant groups, social demands such as raising children have

made participation difficult. Great individual effort has been required to overcome cultural barriers. The PFLP recognized Khaled's popular appeal and promoted her and her story to gain attention, legitimacy, and support, but it was her initiative that brought her to the organization.

In the years since Khaled's hijackings, women's involvement in Palestinian terrorism has been either inconsistent or invisible. Even after proving their success as hijackers, bombers, and cover for men, women have to remind terrorist leaders of their tactical usefulness. It has been especially difficult for them to find active fighting roles in Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Potential female suicide bombers have been turned down by Hamas but have kept searching until secular organizations accepted them. Despite the tactical and propaganda benefits demonstrated by secular female suicide bombers in 2002, Hamas and PIJ struggled to reconcile conservative beliefs with evolving terrorist tactics. By 2003, however, PIJ believed the operational gains outweighed the social costs and began actively recruiting women for

suicide bombings.¹² Leader Ramadan Abdallah Shallah explained the ideological and organizational adjustments the group had to make to accommodate female suicide bombers:

The Shari'ah or religious judgment also deems that if there are sufficient numbers of men to carry out jihad, it is not preferable for women to carry out the jihad. The reason is to keep the woman away from any kind of harm. . . . Every operation is scrutinized and if the female . . . might be taken prisoner or face harm . . . it would not be preferable for the woman to carry out the operation. But if the Mujahidin estimate that the operation would not be fit for or carried out except by a woman because of the circumstances of disguise and reaching the target necessitate it, then we would not object.¹³

Similarly, Sheikh Ahmed Ismail Yassin, founder of Hamas, stated that his organization did not need women in its jihad because "The woman is the second defense line in the resistance of the occupation."¹⁴ Religiously based terrorists are often thought to be irrational and fanatical in their devotion to violence. Both Shallah's and Yassin's statements,

however, show rational and practical approaches. Men are preferred if available. But if only a woman can get to a target, then a woman should be used.

Tamil women faced similar barriers in the LTTE. While the group credits its leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, for including females, both supporters and detractors acknowledge that women were asking to fight, and were fighting for other Tamil groups, before the LTTE began training them for combat in 1984. The Freedom Birds were organized as a result of group needs and women's initiative. Once in the organization, Freedom Birds say they must prove themselves continually. In most cases, there must be a practical reason for terrorist groups to decide to use women in political violence. Female demands for operational roles are insufficient to overcome cultural practices, even among groups such as the PFLP and LTTE that claim women's liberation as part of their cause.

Overcoming Cultural Resistance

One reason women must fight for involvement in politics and violence is that, in many societies, women's roles are limited to wife and mother. The LTTE is an example of this reality. It took the group 12 years to admit women into fighting roles, and it had difficulty determining how to incorporate them. The group is one of the few terrorist/insurgent bodies in the world with explicit rules on cadres' romantic lives and when they can marry. It also experimented with how to train women and employ them in combat. The difficulty of deciding whether the Freedom Birds should cut their hair to help them fight is emblematic of the tension the group faces between the necessity of having women directly involved in political violence and preservation of the Tamil culture. At each turn, the LTTE had to weigh how

if only a woman can get to a target, then a woman should be used

AP/Wide World Photo



27-year-old suicide bomber who carried out attack in downtown Jerusalem

using females in combat and terrorism would affect the group's discipline, ability to fight, and popular support. Its decisions were a result of trial and error.

Necessity appears to help terrorist leaders overcome biases about women. A shortage of male volunteers may have encouraged Palestinian, Chechen, and Tamil groups to involve women in attacks. Given the difficulty of obtaining reliable population statistics for the areas in conflict, it is hard to prove that one of the elements in an

organization's decision is a shortage of men. However, in these cases, the number of men available for terrorist operations has been reduced by outward labor migration, a lack of male volunteers, and arrests, harassment, and investigations of men.

Women, on the other hand, can be left in conflict zones and can move between cities without generating suspicion from security services. For example, in the 1980s,

the Sri Lankan government targeted Tamil males between the ages of 14 and 40 for interrogation and detention.¹⁵ In 1986, when women began fighting in the Freedom Birds, the government detained about 3,000 Tamil men.¹⁶ Additionally, males were targets for recruitment, interrogation, and detention by competing Tamil groups. Consequently, many males fled the country.¹⁷

decisions not to employ women in attacks are shaped by culture, but cultural prohibitions can be overcome by practical requirements

Target assessment may also have helped terrorist leaders overcome cultural biases. For instance, on January 14, 2004, Reem al-Reyashi detonated a suicide bomb at a border crossing in Jerusalem. After the attack, Sheikh Yassin stated that Hamas decided to use a female attacker due to the increasing operational difficulties of getting men to their targets.¹⁸ Even in traditional societies, women's household duties place them in markets and

other public places, allowing them to blend with daily life. They have more flexibility in their dress than men. These factors make them less noticeable and less threatening to security services.

In the Palestinian, Chechen, and Tamil cases, terrorist groups did not begin their activities with women in operational roles. Women became involved only when men were unavailable, in part because of states' security measures. The interaction and learning that occur between terrorist groups and states are important to understanding terrorist actions, particularly why groups would want women.

State Responses

Decisions not to employ women in attacks are shaped by culture, but cultural prohibitions can be overcome by practical requirements. The leaders of Hamas, PIJ, and the LTTE have been explicit in explaining that women are employed when the target necessitates it. As noted above, men tend to be the preferred option for these groups, and women are usually employed when there are not sufficient men for operations or males cannot reach the targets. These factors—manpower and access to targets—are influenced by state actions.

With all three groups, it is impossible with present data to show direct cause and effect between specific state actions and terrorists' decisions to use women. For example, in the 3 months prior to Wafa Idris' January 2002 suicide bombing in Jerusalem, there were at least 13 major terrorist attacks, including suicide bombings inside Israel by male Hamas, PIJ, and Fatah members. There was no change in Israeli security practices that prevented male terrorists from reaching targets and thus forcing Al Aqsa to employ women. Yet it is likely that state actions and policies to combat terrorism had an influence on groups' decisions to change their practices. Indeed, Hamas and PIJ are explicit about picking the right person based on assessment of targets.

Security services' expectations, and occasionally official "profiles" of terrorists, made it easy for governments to focus on men, which may have encouraged groups to employ women. Early in each conflict, states expected terrorists to be young and male. Women were not part of the profile despite evidence of their involvement in all three conflicts. *Mirror imaging* (assuming the adversary's behavior is the same as one's own)

may be partly to blame for states' ignoring the possibility of female terrorists. When the terror campaigns began, these governments did not regularly include significant numbers of women in operational roles in the military, police, intelligence, and other government jobs. They may have assumed that terrorists would act similarly.

States also viewed the cultures from which their adversaries came as so repressive toward women that terrorists would not allow their involvement. The infrequency of female attacks and the invisibility of women in groups could have reinforced these assumptions.

At some point in each conflict, however, states' expectations and assumptions changed. In the Russian-Chechen conflict, Chechen men between the ages of 16 and 60 have been the targets of detention and interrogation. As in Sri Lanka, Russian forces took control of villages to "cleans" them by removing the young men for interrogations, from which many did not return. Unlike Sri Lanka and Israel, Russia has taken steps aimed specifically at female terrorists, most notably expanding cleansing operations to include them. According to one estimate, about 100 women have disappeared in Chechnya since the 2002 Dubrovka hostage-taking.¹⁹ In 2003, the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a directive to search women in headscarves and other traditional Muslim clothing.²⁰

Moscow has not been insensitive to the possibility that targeting women may produce more terrorists of both genders, and its response has taken into account the unique propaganda value of women. In statements explaining why females are targeted, Russian officials emphasize that Chechen groups prey on women in mourning to make them "zombies." With this argument, detentions are meant to protect both Chechen women from becoming zombies and Russian society from the zombies. Federal Security Service officials also claimed that use of women in attacks indicated that the terrorist groups were defeated.²¹

Chechen terrorists' use of women may represent some success by Russian security services in decreasing the number of men available to the groups and their ability to reach targets. Furthermore, the government, through its influence over the media, has been able to take advantage of the unique

propaganda tools that female terrorists offer in its strategy to defeat Chechen terrorism.

Israel has also taken advantage of women's particular propaganda value for counterterrorism. The Foreign Ministry has published reports on female suicide bombers, emphasizing the terrorists groups' desire to exploit vulnerable women. The government has published descriptions of both successful and unsuccessful suicide bombers to illustrate the women's personal problems and how male terrorists took advantage of them. Perhaps most important for this study, Israel stopped profiling individuals and started profiling circumstances—that is, looking for anomalies in behavior or situations as an indication of a terrorist attack rather than trying to identify a person or the type of person who could be a terrorist.

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The government has also tried to balance the need to conduct searches while not further inflaming Palestinian anger by touching Palestinian women. As a partial solution, Israel has included female soldiers and police officers at checkpoints and in interrogations. Because not every checkpoint can be covered, technologies such as X-ray wands have been used.

Sri Lanka has taken a similar approach in confronting female terrorists. As in Israel, it includes women in the police and military. Again, there are not enough women to cover all security checkpoints. Sri Lanka has been willing to negotiate with the Tamil Tigers and maintain ceasefire agreements. Unlike Israel, however, the government does not control all its territory. The LTTE effectively runs many communities in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, complicating counterinsurgency operations.

In all these cases, efforts by governments often increased tensions in the populations they sought to control. The states' actions reduced the number of men available through arrest, detention, and death, perhaps increasing women's motivations for political violence while making them attractive to terrorist groups. Additionally, the decision to search men but not women at checkpoints may have encouraged groups to employ women.

Policy Implications

The actions of the three states are important for understanding terrorists' decisions about the use of women in terrorism and for combating terrorism. First, as in studies of serial killers that drew only on male murderers, studies of individual terrorists have focused only on male terrorists. This emphasis, combined with assumptions about the female nature, created a popular and sometimes official profile of terrorists as young and male. Women's repeated involvement should be a signal that there is no standard terrorist. The first lesson Russia, Israel, and Sri Lanka learned from female terrorism was that women represented a threat. The lesson is not only to add women to an existing profile, as Russia has, but also to recognize the diversity of the threat. The Israeli approach of looking

for anomalies in situations is time- and personnel-intensive but offers more promise than attempting to describe all possible individuals who could be terrorists.

Second, just as groups can gain from sympathetic media portrayals of women terrorists, governments can use groups' ambivalence about female members to state advantage. Israel and Russia use stories of socially marginal women being exploited by men to discredit terrorist groups and explain away female violence. By making the women anomalies in the public mind, states reinforce the idea that they are in control and the public need not fear. These stories could be further exploited to delegitimize and fracture terrorist groups. The LTTE's policies on members' sexual behavior show the difficulty some groups have integrating women. Using propaganda about the group's sexual practices, as in Russia, can both discredit the group and exacerbate mistrust between members.

Finally, the decision by a group to employ women may be a sign that the state's efforts to combat terrorism are having an effect. The LTTE as well as Palestinian and Chechen groups turned to women only when they had to. If that is true with other groups, evidence of the use of women by terrorists may open more policy choices to a government—such as negotiations or incentives to individuals to renounce terrorism—because the group is weakened.

Female participation offers both states and terrorist groups unique options. However,



Woman being searched during joint U.S.-Iraqi raid in Jazeera

1st Combat Camera Squadron (Jeremy Lock)

policymakers should be realistic; women remain the minority. While their roles may be limited, women are important elements of groups and should not be overlooked. Wives know where their husbands are and with whom they meet. Mothers teach their children violence. Sisters, girlfriends, and female comrades enable men to get to their targets. Female terrorists likely know and do more than some security forces or terrorist groups give them credit for.

After al Qaeda's attacks on the United States in 2001, much has been made of terrorists' ability to innovate. Just as states and publics must be wary of underestimating terrorists, they must be cautious of deifying them. The employment of women by terrorist groups in Chechnya, Israel and the Occupied Territories, and Sri Lanka is an example of the limits of terrorists' thinking. Like states, these groups are bound by cultural expectations, demographics, public support, and the international context. Their limited use of women illustrates their strengths and shortcomings. Further exploration of this topic may provide greater insights for governments in combating terrorism. **JFQ**

NOTES

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³ Cathy Porter, *Women in Revolutionary Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 13.

⁴ Jay Bergman, "The Political Thought of Vera Zasulich," *Slavic Review* 38, no. 2 (June 1979), 244.

⁵ Porter, 15–17.

⁶ See, for example, Walter Laqueur, *The New Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 43; and J.B.S. Hardman, "Terrorism: A Summing Up in the 1930s," *The Terrorism Reader*, 227.

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⁸ Russian opinion surveys indicate positive attitudes toward Chechens. See Public Opinion Foundation Database, "Attitude to Chechens: Pity and Fear," January 30, 2003, available at <<http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/Chechnya/chechenian/ed030429>>.

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¹² Yoni Fighe, "Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Female Suicide Bombers," *International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, October 6, 2003, available at <www.ict.org.il/articles/articledet.cfm?articleid=499>.

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¹⁴ " Hamas Founder Opines on Participation of Palestinian Women in Suicide Bombings," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 2, 2002, 8, FBIS 20020202000123.

¹⁵ Rajan Hoole et al., *The Broken Palmyra* (Claremont, CA: The Sri Lankan Studies Institute, 1988), 308.

¹⁶ Edgar O'Ballance, *The Cyanide War: Tamil Insurrection in Sri Lanka, 1973–88* (London: Brassey's UK, 1990), 68.

¹⁷ By 2002, an estimated 500,000 people had fled Sri Lanka, and about 600,000 were internally displaced. Miranda Allison, "Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," *Civil Wars* 6, no. 4 (Winter 2003), 38.

¹⁸ " Hamas uses female suicide bomber and threatens escalation," *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center*, January 14, 2004.

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²⁰ "Russia: MVD Confirms Nationwide Operation to Check Muslim Women," *Moscow Gazette*, July 23, 2003, FBIS CEP20030724000198.

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